

SENIOR REVIEW AND FUNDING RECOMMENDATION
Salton Sea Financial Assistance Program – FY 2012-2013

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| ✓ Applicant: Salton Sea Authority
✓ Project Title: Alamo River Wetland Near Holtville,
CA | ✓ County: Imperial
✓ Grant Request: \$2,371,212
✓ Total Project Cost: \$2,852,112 |
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Project Description: The Salton Sea Authority (the Authority) proposes to work in partnership with the Citizen’s Task Force on the New River (Citizen’s Task Force) to complete the construction of a wetland along the Alamo River. The Citizen’s Task Force was chartered to help improve the quality of water in the New and Alamo Rivers and the Salton Sea. The Authority proposes to complete the construction of a 31-acre complex of sedimentation ponds/wetlands adjacent to the Alamo River on the west side of Holtville, in Imperial County, California. The total water surface area at this site would be 13.4 acres, which would hold 77.6 acre–feet of water and would have a maximum design flow rate of 6 cubic feet per second. The project proponents claim that the wetland would be an important step in improving the quality of water flowing in the Alamo River, a principal tributary to the Salton Sea, that it would have research value, and that it would provide new habitat in the Salton Basin.

Summary

Criteria	Score	Factor	Total
1. Consistency with Program goals and objectives	3	7	21
2. Applicant qualifications	3	3	9
3. Project Readiness	3	3	9
4. Feasibility	3	7	21
Total Score			<u>60</u>

Consistency with Program goals and objectives: This project replicates existing habitat projects on the New River in which drainage water either directly from drains, or from the New River, has been used for wetland development. This project is strictly an enlargement of those prior projects and offers nothing new as a learning platform that cannot already be learned at the existing sites. The monitoring that was promised on the prior projects has not been accomplished at a level necessary for learning about ecological functions, particularly with respect to selenium. Water quality is listed as an objective, but other created wetlands in the area have had limited impact on the Salton Sea. Visual improvements to the area and recreation for the town of Holtville are also listed as secondary objectives but are not goals consistent with the Program. One of the project goals is to create habitat, but there is nothing, besides planting of wetland plant species, that suggests they are promoting habitat or what species they are targeting for their habitat. Nutrients in the water are proposed to be removed by the wetlands, but the amount of water needed to create and sustain the wetlands, as well as evaporative loss and seepage, would detract from the water reaching the Salton Sea, impacting fish and wildlife at the Salton Sea. Studies proposed to understand the ecology of fish or wildlife of the Salton Sea and particularly studies of selenium bioaccumulations could be helpful for Salton Sea birds.; however, details are not provided as to how this will be evaluated, monitored, or managed. Similar studies were promised for other constructed wetlands in the area yet left unsupported.

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Applicant qualifications: The applicant team has extensive experience with similar projects and with wetlands in the Salton Sea area in particular. The team's strength is in the area of constructing wetlands, but not in biological monitoring or risk assessment. These are key needs that may not be adequately addressed and supported by the team. Although team members all have local experience concerning the Salton Sea, there is a lack of biological knowledge between them, which is important concerning the impacts of Selenium and the wildlife use of the wetlands.

Project Readiness: Supporting documents indicate that the preliminary work for the project has been completed and the project will be able to start within 12 months after the agreement execution date. Because of the experience of the project team with wetland construction, the project should be completed within 36 months after award. Since the project is basically a construction project, the proponents have had project oversight on these types of projects previously and thus are aware of the permitting and design considerations for the construction aspect. It is less clear that they possess the technical knowledge or the permitting capability for the design and implementation of monitoring efforts.

Feasibility: The applicants should be able to construct the proposed wetland. Whether or not that wetland can provide the suggested habitat proposed is questionable, and it is unlikely that the wetland will have any impact on water quality in the Salton Sea. Support for the proposal is incomplete or insufficiently documented or reasoned. The project team is knowledgeable in the conditions present and what is required to construct the wetlands and sustain them. Whether the wetlands function the way they are intended is questionable, especially concerning Selenium treatment and potential impacts to wildlife that use the treatment wetlands. Overall, the Management Plan and Work Plan were very general without any adaptive management tactics. The proponents have not demonstrated that they understand any of the biological ramifications of how to make this project work for habitat development and avoidance of adverse impacts. The proposed project also has too many competing objectives that may interfere with each other, e.g. recreation vs. wildlife habitat vs. water treatment (quality).

FUNDING RECOMMENDATION: \$0

Similar projects along the New River are already in place. These wetlands have had limited positive effects on the overall water quality of the Salton Sea. Lack of sufficient monitoring data from those ponds does not support the ecological learning curve expected, including the effects of selenium in the food web. This proposal is also located quite a distance from the Salton Sea thereby reducing the probability of yielding significant positive water quality benefits to the Sea. Furthermore, the proposal lacks detail regarding the design and biological targets of the wetland component. The proposal also lacks a demonstrated knowledge

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of biological monitoring and the linkages to overall project performance. There is also serious question about the wetland's ability to function as described, especially concerning Selenium ecotoxicity and potential impacts to wildlife.